

# Robert Falcon Scott



Captain **Robert Falcon Scott** CVO RN (6 June 1868 – 29 March 1912) was a British Royal Navy officer and explorer who led two expeditions to the Antarctic regions: The Discovery Expedition, 1901–1904, and the ill-fated Terra Nova Expedition, 1910–1913. On the first expedition, he set a new southern record by marching to latitude 82°S and discovered the Polar Plateau, on which the South Pole is located. During the second venture, Scott led a party of five which reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, four weeks after Roald Amundsen's Norwegian expedition. On their return journey, Scott's party discovered plant fossils, proving Antarctica was once forested and joined to other continents. A planned meeting with supporting dog teams from the base camp failed,



Scott, aged thirteen

although Scott had ordered his team to do so, and at a distance of 150 miles from their base camp and 11 miles from the next depot, Scott and his companions died from a combination of exhaustion, starvation and extreme cold.



Scott as a young man

Following the news of his death, Scott became a celebrated hero, a status reflected by the many permanent memorials erected across the nation. In the closing decades of the 20th century, Scott became a figure of controversy, with questions raised about his competence and character. Commentators in the 21st century have on the whole regarded Scott more positively, noting errors made by his team members concerning the dog team Scott ordered to possibly have saved him, but attributing the expedition's fate primarily to misfortune.

## Terra Nova Expedition 1910–1912

### Preparation

Shackleton returned from the Antarctic having narrowly failed to reach the Pole, and this gave Scott the impetus to proceed with plans for his second Antarctic expedition. On 24 March 1909, he had taken the Admiralty-based appointment of naval assistant to the Second Sea Lord which placed him conveniently in London. In December he was released on half-pay, to take up the full-time command of the British Antarctic Expedition 1910, to be known as the Terra Nova Expedition from its ship, **Terra Nova**. It was the expressed hope of the RGS that this expedition would be "scientific primarily, with exploration and the Pole as secondary objects"[58] but, unlike the Discovery Expedition, neither they nor the Royal Society were in charge this time. In his expedition prospectus, Scott stated that its main objective was "to reach the South Pole, and to secure for the British Empire the honour of this achievement". Scott had, as Markham observed, been "bitten by the Pole mania".

In a memorandum of 1908, Scott presented his view that man-hauling to the South Pole was impossible and that motor traction was needed. Snow vehicles did not yet exist however, and so his engineer Reginald Skelton developed the idea of a caterpillar track for snow surfaces. In the middle of 1909 Scott realised that motors were unlikely to get him all the way to the Pole, and decided additionally to take horses (based on Shackleton's near success in attaining the Pole, using ponies), and dogs and skis after consultation with Nansen during trials of the motors in Norway in March 1910. Man-hauling would still be needed on the Polar Plateau, on the assumption that motors and animals could not ascend the crevassed Beardmore Glacier. Dog expert Cecil Meares was going to Siberia to select the dogs, and Scott ordered that, while he was there, he should deal with the purchase of Manchurian ponies. Meares was not an experienced horse-dealer, and the ponies he chose proved mostly of poor quality, and ill-suited to prolonged Antarctic work. Meanwhile, Scott also recruited Bernard Day, from Shackleton's expedition, as his motor expert.

## First season

On 15 June 1910, Scott's ship **Terra Nova**, an old converted whaler, set sail from Cardiff, south Wales. Scott meanwhile was fundraising in Britain and joined the ship later in South Africa. Arriving in Melbourne, Australia in October 1910, Scott received a telegram from Amundsen stating: "Beg leave to inform you **Fram** proceeding Antarctic Amundsen", possibly indicating that Scott faced a race to the pole.



Scott, writing his journal in the Cape Evans hut, winter 1911

The expedition suffered a series of early misfortunes which hampered the first season's work and impaired preparations for the main polar march. On its journey from New Zealand to the Antarctic, **Terra Nova** nearly sank in a storm and was then trapped in pack ice for 20 days, far longer than other ships had experienced, which meant a late-season arrival and less time for preparatory work before the Antarctic winter. At Cape Evans, Antarctica, one of the motor sledges

was lost during its unloading from the ship, breaking through the sea ice and sinking. Deteriorating weather conditions and weak, unacclimatised ponies affected the initial depot-laying journey, so that the expedition's main supply point, One Ton Depot, was laid 35 miles (56 km) north of its planned location at 80° S. Lawrence Oates, in charge of the ponies, advised Scott to kill ponies for food and advance the depot to 80° S, which Scott refused to do. Oates is reported as saying to Scott, "Sir, I'm afraid you'll come to regret not taking my advice." Four ponies died during this journey either from the cold or because they slowed the team down so they were shot. On its return to base, the expedition learned of the presence of Amundsen, camped with his crew and a large contingent of dogs in the Bay of Whales, 200 miles (320 km) to their east. Scott conceded that his ponies would not be able to start early enough in the season to compete with Amundsen's cold-tolerant dog teams for the pole, and also acknowledged that the Norwegian's base was closer to the pole by 60 miles. Wilson was more hopeful, whereas Gran shared Scott's concern. Shortly afterwards, the death toll among the ponies increased to six, three drowning when sea-ice unexpectedly disintegrated, casting in doubt the possibility of reaching the pole at all. However, during the 1911 winter Scott's confidence increased; on 2 August, after the return of a three-man party from their winter journey to Cape Crozier, Scott wrote, "I feel sure we are as near perfection as experience can direct".

## **Journey to the Pole**

Scott outlined his plans for the southern journey to the entire shore party, leaving open who would form the final polar team, according to their performance during the polar travel. Eleven days before Scott's teams set off towards the pole, Scott gave the dog driver Meares the following written orders at Cape Evans dated 20 October 1911 to secure Scott's speedy return from the pole using dogs:

*About the first week of February I should like you to start your third journey to the South, the object being to hasten the return of the third Southern unit [the polar party] and give it a chance to catch the ship. The date of your departure must depend on news received from returning units, the extent of the depot of dog food you have been able to leave at One Ton Camp, the state of the dogs, etc. ... It looks at present as though you should aim at meeting the returning party about March 1 in Latitude 82 or 82.30.*

The march south began on 1 November 1911, a caravan of mixed transport groups (motors, dogs, horses), with loaded sledges, travelling at different rates, all designed to support a final group of four men who would make a dash for the Pole. The southbound party steadily reduced in size as successive support teams turned back. Scott reminded the returning Atkinson of the order "to take the two dog-teams south in the event of Meares having to return home, as seemed likely". By 4 January 1912, the last two four-man groups had reached 87° 34' S. Scott announced his decision: five men (Scott, Edward Wilson, Henry Bowers, Lawrence Oates and Edgar Evans) would go forward, the other three (Teddy Evans, William Lashly and Tom Crean) would return. The chosen group marched on, reaching the Pole on 17 January 1912, only to find that Amundsen had preceded them by five weeks. Scott's anguish is indicated in his diary:

*"The worst has happened"; "All the day dreams must go"; "Great God! This is an awful place".*

### Last march



Scott's group took this photograph of themselves using a string to operate the shutter on 17 January 1912, the day after they discovered Amundsen had reached the pole first

The deflated party began the 800-mile (1,300 km) return journey on 19 January. "I'm afraid the return journey is going to be dreadfully tiring and monotonous", wrote Scott on that day. However, the party made good progress despite poor weather, and had completed the Polar Plateau stage of their journey, approximately 300 miles (500 km), by 7 February. In the following days, as the party made the 100-mile (160 km) descent of the Beardmore Glacier, the physical condition of Edgar Evans, which Scott

had noted with concern as early as 23 January, declined sharply. A fall on 4 February had left Evans "dull and incapable", and on 17 February, after another fall, he died near the glacier foot. Meanwhile, back at Cape Evans, the **Terra Nova** arrived at the beginning of February, and Atkinson decided to unload the supplies from the ship with his own men rather than set out south with the dogs to meet Scott as ordered. When Atkinson finally did leave south for the planned rendezvous with Scott, he

encountered the scurvy-ridden Edward ("Teddy") Evans who needed urgent medical attention. Atkinson therefore tried to send the experienced navigator Wright south to meet Scott, but chief meteorologist Simpson declared he needed Wright for scientific work. Atkinson then decided to send the short-sighted Cherry-Garrard on 25 February, who was not able to navigate, only as far as One Ton depot (which is within sight of Mount Erebus), effectively cancelling Scott's orders for meeting him at latitude 82 or 82.30 on 1 March.

On the return journey from the Pole, Scott reached the 82.30°S meeting point for the dog teams, three days ahead of schedule, noting in his diary for 27 February 1912 "We are naturally always discussing possibility of meeting dogs, where and when, etc. It is a critical position. We may find ourselves in safety at the next depot, but there is a horrid element of doubt." By 10 March the temperature had dropped unexpectedly to below  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), and it became evident the dog teams were not coming: "The dogs which would have been our salvation have evidently failed. Meares [the dog-driver] had a bad trip home I suppose. It's a miserable jumble." With 400 miles (670 km) still to travel across the Ross Ice Shelf, Scott's party's prospects steadily worsened as, with deteriorating weather, a puzzling lack of fuel in the depots, hunger and exhaustion, they struggled northward. In a farewell letter to Sir Edgar Speyer, dated 16 March, Scott wondered whether he had overshot the meeting point and fought the growing suspicion that he had in fact been abandoned by the dog teams: "We very nearly came through, and it's a pity to have missed it, but lately I have felt that we have overshot our mark. No-one is to blame and I hope no attempt will be made to suggest that we had lacked support." On the same day, Oates, whose toes had become frostbitten, voluntarily left the tent and walked to his death. Scott wrote that Oates' last words were "I am just going outside and may be some time".

After walking 20 miles farther despite Scott's toes now becoming frostbitten, the three remaining men made their final camp on 19 March, 11 miles (18 km) short of One Ton Depot. The next day a fierce blizzard prevented their making any progress. During the





The Observation Hill cross, erected in 1913 as a memorial to Scott and his party

next nine days, as their supplies ran out, and with storms still raging outside the tent, Scott and his companions wrote their farewell letters. Scott gave up his diary after 23 March, save for a final entry on 29 March, with its concluding words: "Last entry. For God's sake look after our people". He left letters to Wilson's mother, Bowers' mother, a string of notables including his former commander Sir George Egerton, his

own mother and his wife. He also wrote his "Message To The Public", primarily a vindication of the expedition's organisation and conduct in which the party's failure is attributed to weather and other misfortunes, but ending on an inspirational note, with these words:

*We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last ... Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for.*

Scott is presumed to have died on 29 March 1912, or possibly one day later. The positions of the bodies in the tent when it was discovered eight months later suggested that Scott was the last of the three to die.

The bodies of Scott and his companions were discovered by a search party on 12 November 1912 and their records retrieved. Their final camp became their tomb; a high cairn of snow was erected over it, topped by a roughly fashioned cross. In January 1913, before **Terra Nova** left for home, a large wooden cross was made by the ship's carpenters, inscribed with the names of the lost party and Tennyson's line from his poem **Ulysses**: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield", and was erected as a permanent memorial on Observation Hill, overlooking Hut Point.

A century of storms and snow have covered the cairn and tent, which are now encased in the Ross Ice Shelf as it inches towards the Ross Sea. In 2001 glaciologist Charles R. Bentley estimated that the tent with the bodies was under about 75 feet (23 m) of ice and about 30 miles (48 km) from the point where they died; he speculated that in about 275 years the bodies would reach the Ross Sea, and perhaps float away inside an iceberg.



Memorial window in Binton Church, Warwickshire, one of four panels. This one depicts the cairn erected over the site of Scott's last tent



1915 statue of Scott at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, sculpted by his widow, Kathleen Scott.<sup>[104]</sup>